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^Lone Hijacker in Chinese Custody, Soviet Embassy Says<

PEKING (AP) — A suspect accused of hijacking a Soviet airliner that made a forced landing in northeast China on Dec. 19 is still in Chinese custody, a Soviet Embassy spokesman said today.

"I don't know what they are going to do with him," said embassy press officer Vladimir Veselov.

He said he could not confirm rumors the hijacker was the co-pilot of the Antonov-24 propeller plane.

The aircraft was flown back to the Soviet Union on Dec. 21, he said. The Chinese Foreign Ministry had announced earlier all passengers and crew returned home safely on Dec. 21.

The official English-language Peking Review on today quoted Chinese Public Security Minister Ruan Chongwu as saying, "China is most concerned about air piracy and will punish hijackers severely."

But he did not mention the Soviet hijacking, and a ministry spokesman, asked what measures China planned against the hijacker, told The Associated Press: "I'll take your question and get back to you if we have anything to say."

Many details of the unprecedented Sino-Soviet hijacking remain unknown, including the hijacker's identity and motive.

Until today, neither side had mentioned the fate of the hijacker.

The official Soviet news agency Tass said the plane was on a local flight in Siberia and "had to alter its course as a result of forcible actions of an armed criminal on board."

It landed at Gannan, Heilongjiang province, on Dec. 19 with about 50 people on board, Chinese provincial officials said.

One local official said the hijacker's aim was to defect to South Korea, but this has not been confirmed by Peking or Moscow. However, Gannan is on a direct line from Siberia to South Korea.

Provincial officials also said the plane landed on flat land, miles from the nearest airport, when it ran out of fuel.

The Soviet Embassy spokesman said he was not clear on how the aircraft took off for its return flight, but he said, "The plane is in our country. It returned on the 21st."

Tass reported Dec. 25 that the Soviet side thanked China for sending the passengers and crew home as soon as possible in a "spirit of good-neighborly cooperation."

The embassy spokesman said the incident would have "no influence on our relations with China," which have expanded rapidly in trade and other areas since 1982 but remain snagged over Cambodia, Afghanistan and border troop deployments.

Under Chinese criminal law, the penalty for hijacking ranges from three years to life in prison.

In October, a Chinese representative to the United Nations made a four-point proposal for curbing terrorism. One point called for strengthened international conventions on punitive measures and extradition.

Despite China's stated concern about hijacking, the Communist

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